The Business Climate
Of
Ironton, Ohio
Survey Report

Research Conducted By
The International Institute of Folknography
Ohio University Southern
Ironton, Ohio

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Conducted for
The Ironton Port Authority
Ironton, Ohio
Abstract

In an effort to discern the business climate prevailing in the municipality of Ironton, Ohio, researchers surveyed business owners and/or managers in Ironton, Ohio and the immediate surrounding area. The study engaged the qualitative research method known as *folknography* and targeted functioning businesses in the target area. The study was conducted during the spring of 2005. After the completion of the initial field work, data were collected, analyzed, and summarized producing this document.
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Introduction

The City of Ironton, Ohio was founded in 1849 by John Campbell along the banks of the Ohio River, and today is recognized as Ohio's southernmost city and one of the communities making up the Tri-State metropolitan area (Huntington, WV; Ashland, KY; Ironton, OH). The city has a population of approximately 11,000 and is located on about four square miles nestled between the Ohio River and U.S. Highway 52.

Ironton holds historical distinction, most notably linked to the Civil War, Underground Railroad, and the Pig Iron industrial days. The Lawrence County Historical Society operates the county’s museum within the city limits in the historical home of Reverend John Rankin, a prominent abolitionist. Ironton is also the home of the oldest, continuous Memorial Day Parade in the nation. Each year since 1868, Ironton has hosted a Memorial Day Parade honoring America’s service men and women.

Centrally located within the United States, Ironton has the unique advantage of being the seat of Lawrence County and within a day’s drive of 80 percent of the nation’s population. Boasting private and public schools, a four-year accredited university and vocational training, Ironton provides the instructional capabilities necessary to prepare a ready workforce (www.ironton-ohio.com).
Project Description

The Ironton Port Authority, in an effort to gain perceptions and knowledge of business prospects and qualitatively measure the business climate in Ironton, Ohio, and the immediate surrounding area, requested that the International Institute of Folknography conduct a research investigation focusing on the business climate, possibilities of expansion, and the prospects for development in the target area. Researchers from Ohio University Southern and the International Institute of Folknography conducted the field work in the spring of 2005.

The Port Authority requested this study in hopes of discovering the attitudes and perceptions that current business owners and operators hold concerning the future of doing business in Ironton. Team Folknography decided to also seek quantitative foundation and benchmarking information concerning the prospects of economic expansion and growth for the Ironton area.

In recent years, businesses have folded, moved away, or terminated operations leaving the community of Ironton struggling with a declining tax base, difficult circumstances for city management, and a less than hopeful attitude held by the citizens of the community. (Lucas, David M. Ironton, Ohio Project, Ohio University Southern, International Institute of Folknography, May 2004)
Through literature and Internet searches, researchers compiled a list of businesses operating in the Ironton, Ohio area in order to conduct the Ironton Business Climate Survey. The initial business list included nearly 300 businesses in the Ironton-Coal Grove, Ohio area. Research teams were assigned several pages of the businesses master list and interviewed (surveyed) the owner or manager at each business. Researchers conducted the field work in the months of March through May, 2005. During the study and while out in the field, researchers discovered that some of the businesses included in the original list had ceased operations. At the time of this report, out of the 300 business entities included on the original contact list, only 270 businesses continue commercial activities.

Upon initial contact, each participant was advised completely of the purpose and intent of the research project. Participation was voluntary and no premiums were given to any participant. The researchers not only engaged the survey questions as requested by the Port Authority but also sought out opinions, perceptions, and comments during the survey process. The interviews were conducted in a casual and relaxed manner.
Statistical Results of the Survey

In an effort to provide a benchmark of quantitative data along with the qualitative data such as perceptions of the prospects of business in the Ironton area, the following set of statistics offers a general business climate overview. In this report, the itemized, statistical data is presented first and then the same information is presented in graph form for clarity. All quantitative data represented in this report carries a margin of error rate of + or – 3%. Researchers completed and compiled a total number of 193 surveys of the businesses in the Ironton, Ohio area.

On the field research survey, questions numbering eight through ten were designed to provide the participants an open opportunity to voice their opinions, perceptions, and ideas concerning the business climate and prospects for commercial activities in Ironton. These qualitative data results are presented in rank order of response. The reader should note that in the data analysis of these responses, researchers created taxonomy of general domains for categorizing the responses. Alongside each domain, a specific number represents of the total respondents that mentioned that particular topic and is included to demonstrate the significance of that domain.

Readers should take note that most of the research field workers were not residents of Ironton and kept all personal feelings and attitudes out of the conversations and interview events. In other words, this project was handled in a most objective and careful manner so as not to taint any responses or
statements produced by the participants. Readers should also note that this research project was created at the behest of the Ironton Port Authority and that the results are not necessarily the opinions of the International Institute of Folknography or Ohio University Southern, but are the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of the business owners and merchants of Ironton.

**Quantitative Statistical Data**

**Question 1:** Do you plan to expand the business in the next twelve months?

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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>87%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13%</td>
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**Question 2:** Do you plan to hire additional employees in the next twelve months?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>1%</td>
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Question 2: Do you plan to hire additional employees in the next twelve months?

- No: 0%
- Yes: 25%
- Maybe: 75%

Question 3: Have you considered moving your business out of Ironton recently?

- No: 95%
- Yes: 5%

Question 4: Have you requested assistance from the city for your business?

- No: 96%
- Yes: 4%
**Question 4:** Have you requested assistance from the city for your business?

- **No:** 100%
- **Yes:** 0%

**Question 5:** If so, did you receive the assistance you requested?

- **Yes:** 50%
- **No:** 50%

**Question 6:** How would you rate the business climate in Ironton?

- **Poor:** 68%
- **Fair:** 25%
- **Good:** 6%
Excellent 1%

**Question 6:** How would you rate the business climate in Ironton?

![](chart.png)

**Question 7:** Would you rate the opportunity for new business locating in Ironton?

- Poor 61%
- Fair 31%
- Good 7%
- Excellent 1%

![](chart.png)
Qualitative Data

Question 8: Suggest some ways that city could improve the business climate:

Remodeling/Maintenance

- Improve and Increase Parking - 29 respondents
- Fix the streets - 13 respondents
- Make city attractive - 4 respondents
- Tear down old/depressed buildings - 2 respondents
- Industrial park needs to say “Welcome!” Should be cleaned & beautified - 1 respondent
- Clean up, make landlords clean up their property - 1 respondent
- Get bridge built for improved traffic flow - 1 respondent
- Face lift to existing businesses - 1 respondent
- Clean up the delinquent properties. Fix up commercial district, make the place more presentable. - 1 respondent
- Have downtown landlords maintain up their property, tear down eye sores. Some places aren’t even up to code, no business could move in if they could afford it. - 1 respondent
- Clean up downtown Ironton - 1 respondent

City Government

- Elect an entirely new city council - 47 respondents
- Improve the outlook of the city leaders - 1 respondent
- Get rid of the mayor - 1 respondent
- City council must resolve their budget debate, compromise and reach consensus on pressing city issues. - 1 respondent
- City leaders need to concern themselves about the good for all and not just their personal agenda’s - 1 respondent
- Our city and county governments should develop a plan and set aside politics and seek a common goal for the common good - 1 respondent

Jobs/Industry

- Add new businesses - 25 respondents
- Some nice sit-down restaurants - 1 respondent
- Need more viable businesses to get traffic flowing in Ironton - 1 respondent
- Council must want businesses to come in. - 1 respondent
- Better jobs, more jobs - 5 respondents
- Let the little people (old small businesses) come back - 1 respondent
- Bring in industry that provides real work for residents - 1 respondent
Marketing/Management

- Create a liaison person that could help guide businessmen to correct business procedures in Ironton (expedite procedure) - 1 respondent
- Energize the Enterprise Zone - 1 respondent
- Ticket people who have abandoned properties - 1 respondent
- Too many people in area are unlicensed & unqualified.- 1 respondent
- Be more proactive toward business recruitment - 1 respondent
- Develop a marketing plan - 1 respondent
- Better city management - 1 respondent
- Take an aggressive approach to business recruitment - 1 respondent
- Keep municipal facilities better maintained - 1 respondent
- Don’t discourage businesses moving into the city - 1 respondent
- Develop a short and long term city growth plan - 1 respondent
- Council must be more open minded - 1 respondent

Fees/Taxes

- Offer tax breaks/relief or other incentives for businesses to locate here – 4 respondents
- Be sparing as possible with business & user fees. - 1 respondent
- Quit charging so much for business operations - 1 respondent

Health Care

- Better health care and hospital access. People don’t want to go across bridge for health care - 1 respondent

Question 9: Name some advantages for having your business located in Ironton:

Location/Size

- We’re local - 77 respondents
- Small town “community feel;” everybody knows everybody – 8 respondents
- (Conveniently) close to courthouse – 2 respondents
- Lawrence County seat is located here (brings people to court house), located on Ohio River (Rail transportation) & U.S. Highways - 1 respondent
- It’s my hometown, we work with our customers - 1 respondent
- Being on the main drag - 1 respondent
- Hometown business we are here as our clients are here - 1 respondent
- Small community with consistent loyal customers - 1 respondent
- Keeps travel down, advantage of being able to live where you grew up - 1 respondent
• Hometown people, good people - 1 respondent
• Crossroads of four highways, three states, railways, utilities, ready work force, university - 1 respondent
• Hometown: you can raise and keep kids here - 1 respondent
• Centrally located to my clients - 1 respondent
• Good community - 1 respondent
• Beautiful area - 1 respondent
• Right in the city - 1 respondent
• Close to the Tri-State area - 1 respondent
• Family atmosphere - 1 respondent
• Accessible - 1 respondent
• Interstate access - 1 respondent
• Close to home - 2 respondents
• Close to Ashland - 1 respondent
• Close to Greenup - 1 respondent
• Near Kentucky border, river location - 1 respondent

Receptiveness
• Family oriented/family area - 7 respondents
• People; good people; good friendly people, good place to raise children - 3 respondents
• Everybody knows each other - 2 respondents
• Humor, loyal customer base - 1 respondent
• Lawrence County residents have been very loyal to our business - 1 respondent

Business/Industry
• Repeat business - 1 respondent
• Good pool of employees - 1 respondent
• Only legal class people in town - 1 respondent
• Family business - 1 respondent
• The need for it - 1 respondent
• Business has been here 50 years - 1 respondent
• A job - 1 respondent
• Established in 1888 - 1 respondent
• Plenty of devoted and experience work force - 1 respondent

Services
• Elderly people need services - 1 respondent
• Women can get their hair done - 1 respondent

Taxes/Fees
• Taxes, worker’s comp - 1 respondent
Question 10: Name some disadvantages for having your business located in Ironton:

City Government
- Ironton City Council stands as the major obstacle for growth in this community - 55 respondents

Parking
- Improve parking - 28 respondents

Location/Size
- Small town - 14 respondents
- Small minor disadvantage - 1 respondent
- By being a small community, our capacity or our opportunity to expand is limited. - 1 respondent
- Location - 1 respondent
- It’s too small - 1 respondent

Economy
- Low income/hard for customers to pay for services and merchandise; poor community, people aren’t able to spend much money on extras/economy is very poor - 7 respondents
- Slow or no growth; no new customers - 2 respondent
- No money to work with - 1 respondent
- Need further growth - 1 respondent
- Economic climate - 1 respondent
- Not much growth potential for new customers - 1 respondent

Business/Industry
- Need new businesses to come in & prop up the income of people in area to buy the products offered - 1 respondent
- New businesses are going to the upper end of county - 1 respondent
- Lack of opportunities for obtaining new business clients - 1 respondent
- Some people are doing business without a license - 1 respondent
- Have to compete outside area - 1 respondent
- Extra money added for having business - 1 respondent
- Business climate has declined and the opportunity for young people to live and work here is disappearing - 1 respondent
- There isn’t a lot of different businesses in Ironton and most people go to Ashland for comparative pricing & cheaper taxes - 1 respondent
- Lack of customers - 1 respondent
- Nowhere to eat - 1 respondent
- Turning into college town - 1 respondent
City Streets
- Improve city streets - 5 respondents

Management
- Historical union problems, not a good city to raise kids in, police force not adequate on Friday and Saturday night - 1 respondents
- The way city is run - 1 respondents
- School system should focus on scholastic achievement first and sports second - 1 respondent
- Poor infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, visually not appealing - 1 respondent

Fees
- Cheaper garbage and water rates - 1 respondent
- Taxes - 1 respondent
- Municipal Fees - 1 respondent

Jobs
- Kids having to move away to find work - 1 respondent
- Need more jobs - 1 respondent
- No jobs - 1 respondent

Health Care
- No hospital - 2 respondents

Traffic Flow
- No traffic flow, need a reason to come downtown - 1 respondent
- Long way to drive for nurses - 1 respondents

Residents
- The perspective by residents in Tri-State that Ironton has been and still is declining - 1 respondent

Garbage
- Trash - 1 respondent
Analysis of Data

The results of this study should be viewed as highly reliable in that the margin of error for the quantitative data is 3% plus or minus. In other words, the percentages given in the results of the data allow the reader to trust the numbers and percentages within a 3% point of accuracy. The data collection process was unmarred and without incident. The field work was accomplished by trained folknographers with limited or no bias.

After reviewing the data, one can determine that, even though business operators in the Ironton area see little hope for expansion in their business over the next few years, these same people have no plans for moving their business out of Ironton. The majority of business owners and operators in Ironton are extremely loyal to the region (see question 3). This loyalty is fiercely and emotionally rooted in the mindset of the majority.

A sobering fact highlighted realized from reviewing the results of this study is the high percentage of business people who do not have confidence in future growth potential while doing business in the region. The numbers demonstrate that 92% of the merchants and business people feel that there exists little hope that growth and/or expansion will be possible in the near future in Ironton. They wish growth would happen but they do not think a strategy is in place that would lead to this growth.

Over 93% of those surveyed believe that the business climate in the Ironton region offers little for the perspective business operator. The overall
perception of those surveyed is that Ironton would not be a good choice for a perspective business person to start up or open a new enterprise. This lack of confidence certainly feeds the spiraling decline of confidence in the Ironton market and economic projections.

Through the interviews, field researchers discovered a set of underlying perceptions held by the majority of the respondents. These perceptions were identified by the respondents as the basic problems facing the business operators in the Ironton area. Respondents said that:

1. The present Ironton City Council makes growth in Ironton nearly impossible. Respondents generally believe that City Council members are more interested in promoting their own opinions or agendas rather than promoting the general welfare of the community and people. One business owner stated, “Our town council stands in the way of growth in Ironton.”

2. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they had not requested assistance from the city (96%). Only half of those who had requested assistance indicated that assistance had been provided by the city. With the general feel that city government does not exhibit concern for the business owners, it is likely that more business owners would request support if they thought help would (or could) be provided. At present, business operators feel that no help is available to them.
3. Business operators in Ironton feel that parking presents a problem in regard to growth and expansion. Some view the current parking meters as troublesome to would-be customers while others perceive that shoppers do not wish to park on the street. Some believe that Ironton offers limited parking possibilities.

4. The small town status seems to present a double-edged sword for the merchants. Some think that the smallness of Ironton prevents the possibility of growth. Others view this small town feel as a positive because the community closeness adds to the charm and attractiveness of Ironton as a good place to raise children, maintain a family, and remain safe in an ever more dangerous world.

5. Nine percent of the business owners and managers interviewed pointed to the sagging economy as the culprit in the demise of the commercial growth. With the lack of good paying jobs, unemployment, and overall vanishing opportunities, the business folk sense that Ironton faces a long road to economic recovery. Yet, most felt a sense of hopefulness that something should and could be done to improve the circumstances of the Ironton business climate. Overall, business operators hold a deep sense of loyalty to the region and feel very loyal to their community. Even though they feel that growth is a long way off in the future, the majority do not plan on leaving the area or relocating their businesses.
6. Business owners and managers feel that the physical appearance of the city continues in general decline. Over 34% of those interviewed recommended that the city officials begin enforcing laws that require up-keep and maintenance to buildings in the city limits. One business owner said, “We’ve come to the precipice. We must return to clean streets, attractive buildings and houses, and quaint, shaded neighborhoods. We can’t afford to slide further into ghetto-like conditions.” The business operators applaud tough zoning laws, stringent building codes, and city restrictions that call on all city citizens to “clean up the place!”
Summary and Conclusions

The spirit of the community and its citizens exemplifies the quality of life that can be found within Ironton. Ironton offers historic charm, water sports on the Ohio River, numerous activities in the nearby Wayne National Forest, and an attractive location for living and raising a family. The Ironton Port Authority sought to discover the views and perceptions of the merchants and business owners currently operating in the Ironton area.

In an overview of these data presented, several summary conclusions can be made. First, the business climate in the Ironton area is depressed. Yet, the business operators hold a fierce sense of loyalty to the community and the region’s market. This presents the silver lining behind the dark clouds. Although the merchants and business owners do not plan to expand their businesses, they certainly do not plan to cease or abandon their business in the Ironton municipality. The business operators are determined. If this loyalty could be harnessed and directed (channeled), certainly business prospects and perceptions in Ironton would improve immediately.

Without a doubt, the business operators hold the Ironton City Council responsible for the continued demise of the inactivity and lack of growth in the economic situation in Ironton. Comments such as, “The Council needs to stop fighting and start working” illuminate the perceptions of the majority of business operators. Lack of planning, cooperation, and progress in solving simple city management circumstances have frustrated business owners and
operators to the point that they feel that the old adage “You can’t fight city hall” is, in deed, reality in Ironton. Said one business owner, “the council does enough fighting among themselves for all of us!” A notion of city planning, strategic design and collaboration seems to be in order in Ironton.

The solutions suggested by the business operators in Ironton seem simple enough to execute as well. One business owner explained, “Look. When you go get a small business loan, you have to offer up a business plan. You have to show the loan people a strategy. Yet, if you go ask our city council to show you a business plan, they can’t! They don’t have one. The city council and the mayor need to get together one weekend soon and lock themselves in a room and hammer out a set of short-term and long-term goals and objectives and then really follow through. We elected them to do just that.”

The suggestion seems valid. What business, corporation, agency, or industry can grow without a growth plan? The city needs a strategy. Who better to draft a city strategy than the city officials? In any case, this is the general perception and feelings of the business operators. Ironton needs a plan.
**Recommendations**

Based on an analysis of this study and a sense of desire on behalf of the business community, we recommend that the leaders in the City of Ironton, including the Port Authority members, City Council, the Mayor, and local civic and business organizations come together to focus on the future of the community in the spirit of a *family*. The groups need to remove the hostility toward governmental units which often comes to the surface of conversations relating to the current issues facing the city. The governmental units need to *listen* to the constituents and avoid becoming personally defensive as the planning process evolves. A strategic planning summit should be held so that ideas for development, economic growth, cooperation and community vision could be generated. In other words, city managers need to come together like adults and plan for the future.

The City of Ironton serves as the seat of the Lawrence County government. City officials should consider the opinions of the Lawrence County residents and businesses in future growth plans. While the county residents do not elect the city officials, the actions of these elected officials impact the economic decisions of this group of potential business owners and clientele. Support for future county governmental growth located in the City of Ironton could be impacted by the actions of the city officials and business leaders. In that Ironton is the county seat, the city of Ironton should take the lead in providing thoughtful leadership for the whole of Lawrence County.
Ironton, Ohio’s prominent historical distinctions offer numerous educational and tourism opportunities that need to be given more national attention. The city continues to be the center for many governmental agencies and is home to Ohio University Southern. With its approximately 2,000 student headcount per academic quarter and over 100 employees, the University provides a significant traffic flow into the city limits. While the industrial/manufacturing base is no longer active in the city limits, the city has opportunities for future growth in its industrial park. City officials should immediately design and implement a business recruiting strategy.

Tourism seems to offer the most significant and immediate possibilities for growth. Especially important in this region are opportunities for tourism growth in areas such as:

- The Underground Railroad
- River and water sports activities
- Wayne National Forest and Lake Vesuvius
- Historic iron production sites
- Festivals (historic, crafts, river and agricultural)
- Architectural tours
- Hospitality
- Outdoor sporting activities

It is important for leaders to focus on the family-oriented atmosphere and small town feel that has been overwhelmingly indicated as one of the
leading advantages of having a business in the city. The city should pull from the strength of its *family* and design a plan for growth that takes advantage of the positive characteristics. The businesses in Ironton have many encouraging attributes, especially personal loyalty and community pride. They will support activities which lead to growth and renewed economic strength. They want to be a family.

The climate for business in Ironton, Ohio can be best described as *simmering*. The merchants, business owners and operators do not expect much from the city managers and do not ask much from them. On the other hand, the business people are intensely loyal and hold the people and the region in high regard. With such loyalty and positive views of the region, only a spark of enthusiasm, positive rhetoric, and/or leadership would surely lead to renewed economic growth generating a rebounding and robust municipal and county economy. The authors conclude this report with an old but familiar Bible quote:

> *Without vision, the people perish.*
Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to thank the individuals who participated in this research project, especially the business owners and operators who completed the project surveys. The statistical data in this report was compiled by folknography specialist Nicky Sprouse. Field researchers for the project included: Christian Anderson, Tyler Clyse, Kathy Mays, Erica Melvin, Sara Fisher, Seth Knore, and George McCalvin.

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For more information see:

www.folknography.org

or

www.southern.ohiou.edu
Appendix A

Ironton Business Survey

Business Name_____________________________________ Date _______________

**Introduction** – We seek to gauge the business climate in Ironton. Response is voluntary and will be kept confidential. We appreciate your cooperation!

I am: the business owner manager employee (Circle one)

1. Do you plan to expand your business in the next twelve months? Y N
2. Do you plan to hire additional employees in the next twelve months? Y N
3. Have you considered moving your business out of Ironton recently? Y N
4. Have you requested assistance from the city for your business? Y N
5. If so, did you receive the assistance you requested? Y N

6. How would you rate the business climate in Ironton? (Circle one) Poor Fair Good Excellent

7. Would you rate the opportunity for new businesses locating in Ironton? Poor Fair Good Excellent

8. Suggest some ways the city could improve the business climate:

9. Name some advantages for having your business located in Ironton:

10. Name some disadvantages for having your business located in Ironton: